THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL (16th century)

A young Lady, possibly Lady Arbella (or Arabella) Stuart (1575–1615), wearing silver dress adorned with jewels, lace insert, her right hand resting on a heart-shaped locket on a diamond chain

Circa: circa 1590

circa 1590

Oil on board

Rectangular, 100 mm. (3.9 in.) x 60 mm. (2.3 in.) high

Gilded wood frame

The large leg-o-mutton sleeves and deep ‘V’ of this sitter’s stomacher date her to the early 1590s, when Arbella Stuart was in her teens. As a great-great granddaughter of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, she had a strong claim to the throne of England. The present portrait compares well to an oil portrait said to show Arbella at the age of 13 at Hardwick Hall[1], the place where she was brought up by her Grandmother, Bess of Hardwick after she was orphaned (by her father in 1576 and her mother in 1582).

The present portrait shows Arbella as a potential bride - her hair worn ‘maiden style’ and a fine lace veil on her head. The quality of the locket (set, it seems, with a huge ruby at the centre) and the jewelled bands on her sleeves suggest that she was a lady of some means.

The heart-shaped locket may have contained a portrait of her lover or future husband, or it may have been closer to the construction of the recently discovered Tudor Heart pendant which potentially dates to circa 1518.[2] This heart jewel is decorated with a white and red Tudor rose entwined with a pomegranate bush. The red elements on this gold locket are made with red enamel, while the locket on the present work looks to be a ruby flanked by two figures/ cherubs where the colour may have been picked out in red enamel.

Many projects of marriage were proposed for Arbella - with Lord Denbigh, son of Earl of Leicester; James VI of Scotland, the 1st of England; with the son of Duke of Parma; with Esme Stuart, Duke of Lenox and with Henry IV of France. However, her claim to the English throne meant that her marriage prospects were tightly controlled - not only by her ambitious grandmother but also by Elizabeth I. Portraits such as this may have been used to send to potential suitors, or even to those who were keeping a close eye on the line of succession, particularly as for most of her childhood and teens Arbella was kept at Hardwick up in Derbyshire under strictly controlled supervision and rarely seen in public.

In 1610, without the consent of the then king, James I/VI, Arbella became engaged to William Seymour, second son of Lord Beauchamp and grandson of the Earl of Hertford and Lady Katherine Grey. He was only twenty-three, she was thirty-five. After his accession, James seemed outwardly inclined to be magnanimous towards Arbella, but he remained sensitive to any hint that her claim to the throne that he now occupied was superior to his. For example, when the French ambassador thoughtlessly remarked that Arbella was a suitable successor for James, the King demanded his immediate recall.

After their marriage, Arbella and William were sent to the tower, where a bungled escape left her imprisoned once again, while her husband relished freedom in Europe. On 25 September 1615, Arbella Stuart died after four years in the Tower of London, shortly before her 40th birthday. In the weeks before her death, she would not allow her physicians to attend her and refused to eat.

The sitter's gesturing hand shows that the artist, at present unidentified, may have been familiar with court portraits and portrait miniatures. Nicholas Hilliard (c.1547-1619), who painted Arbella in a magnificent cabinet portrait, also used elegant hands in his miniatures to gesture – particularly over the sitter's heart, clasping important jewels or caressing hair. In the case of the present image the hand gesture is clear – that the expensive locket has sealed a love match – and this portrait of the recipient is a gesture of thanks.

Although it is tempting to associate the 'CR' branded initials on the reverse of the portrait with the collection of Charles I ('CR' for 'Charles Rex'), the branding omits the crown which would indicate that this had once been part of the Royal Collection.

[1] Collection Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire; NT 1129095

[2] The Tudor Jewel was recently saved for the nation by The British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/tudor-heart-appeal